

THE REALITY OF PAIN

A Sermon

BY

REV. WILLIAM H. LYON, D.D.

OF BROOKLINE, MASS.



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THE REALITY OF PAIN.

For we have not an high priest that cannot be touched with the feeling of our infirmities.— HEBREWS iv. 15.

There are earnest people who assure us that pain does not exist, that it is a delusion of the sinful mind. To Jesus it was very real. It never failed to touch his heart, and he devoted much time to curing it. The fact that he cured it by spiritual power, and not by medicine and surgery, did not show that he believed there was no pain, but simply that some kinds of pain can best be reached through the mind or spirit. This is a belief that most great religious teachers have held, and have acted upon. We need to be called back, over and over again, to the fact that the body can be affected through the soul both for ill and for good; that, as one of the punishments of sin and folly is physical derangement, the derangement can be made to return on the path by which it entered. Whatever bodily injury is wrought through the mind can be cured through the mind. Anger and anxiety, fear and envy, hatred and regret, work more mischief upon the body than many physical vices. The body and the soul make common cause in many things. Cure either one, and you cure the other. If it is wonderful what a difference putting health into the soul makes to the body, it is quite as wonderful what a difference putting health into the body makes to the soul. What we are so often told, and what is so often beautifully illustrated in these days, that the body can be cured through the mind, is true; but it is only half the truth. It is a half that needs to be told, especially when worry over many unnecessary things is causing so many unnecessary diseases. The upper layer of humanity is suffering almost as much from a perverted imagination which finds its opportunity in the idleness and indolence of luxury as from diseases which had their origin in the body. Wrong bodily living creates disease among the lower classes. Wrong mental and spiritual living is doing the same among the higher.

Nevertheless, there are physical ailments that men come honestly by. They are the result, not of idleness, but of overwork; not of luxury, but of privation; not of the lack of the spur of necessity, but of its very sharpness. They come from wills and nerves worn out in doing the work of the world,—not, indeed, always wisely; but earnest men cannot always be thinking of themselves and their dangers. To such warriors of the daily life some recently developed forms of Christianity have brought genuine help. We discovered half a century ago here in America that we had been neglecting our bodies. We began to study the questions of food, exercise, and pure air. We went back to God's world, and God met us there; and from Him life, strength, and good spirits poured back into us. He made our boys and girls grow tall and shapely, perhaps a little rebellious and independent in their overflowing animal spirits, but honest, natural, and pure. But heredity had done its work upon many of them; and the fever of American life and the deceitfulness of riches added some mischief of their own, so that deeper ailments were developing among them than ever wrong bodily habits could have caused. Religion said, "This is my business." Churches rose to tell us what we all knew before, but had forgotten in the joy of our conquests over nature, that the body can be approached through the spirit. It is an ancient discovery. It is not even original with Christianity. "Fear the Lord and depart from evil," said the book of Proverbs. "It shall be health to thy navel and marrow to thy bones." "The light of the eyes rejoiceth the heart, and good tidings make the bones fat." It is what all the churches have been teaching, but have not made a power of daily life. It is not to their credit that other churches have had to be founded upon this neglected truth as a corner-stone, and that what ought to have been preached in sweet reasonableness is proclaimed with exaggeration and in connection with an erroneous philosophy. In spite of the exaggerations that have grown up in some forms of it, we have to thank some recent teachers of the "New Thought" who have restored vitality to religion, and, in a nervous and brooding generation, have brought once more to the front the simple power of faith.

But can we say that there is no such thing as pain? If there is not, then there is nothing. If we do not know that we suffer, we do not know anything. We do not know that

we have any bodies or that there is a material world. That way lies intellectual suicide. If we cannot trust the nerves when they bring us sensations that are unpleasant, we cannot trust them when they bring us those that are pleasant. There is no world of nature, and all its beauty is a mere fancy. If we are deceived in this, how can we believe in anything? What trust can we place in any of our primal instincts or in the laws of thought? How can we put any reliance upon hope or faith? Religion itself may be a figment of the imagination, and the very teaching that would make nothing of pain may be as untrustworthy as our idea of pain itself.

The notion that pain is unreal comes from philosophy, not from experience. No one who is actually suffering pain has any doubt of its reality. The doubt comes from the notion that it is evil, and that, since God is good, there can be no evil in his world except that which man puts there. Since pain would be evil, therefore, it cannot exist. Unfortunately, however, we are at least as sure of rheumatism as we are of the goodness of God; and, if either one is to be set aside as a delusion, it may not be the pain. What we really have to do is not to reconcile our pain with the divine goodness, but the divine goodness with our pain; and the question we must first settle is whether pain is good or evil. This seems to be in dispute between God and man. Man considers pain evil. If he had made the world, he would never have made it the scene or the agent of pain. God seems to consider suffering a good, for he has mixed it in with all sentient life. As soon as life can feel anything, it feels its share of pain. There are signs even among the plants that they find some things unpleasant. They turn from darkness to light, from cold to warmth, from dryness to moisture, and even appear to resent the touch of the human hand. Just as the old theology called death a result of human sin, though we know that it has always walked hand in hand with life, so we are told to-day that pain is a human delusion, though we know it has always walked hand in hand with pleasure. The two take their place among those pairs of twins which roam through the universe together wherever either one can go,—light and darkness, heat and cold, attraction and repulsion. More than this, there is no sign that pain is passing away as life takes on fairer and fuller forms. The human body is capable of more exquisite torture than any of the lower

animals, and to this have been added the sufferings of the mind. There is no indication that the brute regrets the past or is worried over the future ; and, if he is capable of remorse, it is in a coarser form than that which torments man. As you look at Paul writhing in his spiritual sorrow and impotency,—“ The good that I would I do not, but the evil that I would not, that I do. Wretched man that I am, who shall deliver me from the body of this death ? ” — or at the Master, not only suffering the physical pangs that come upon a delicate frame, but horror-stricken in the loneliness of his momentary depression,—“ My God, my God, why hast thou forsaken me ? ” — we feel that so far ahead as we can see pain and life are likely to go together.

Now he would be a bold man who would profess to have seen through the mystery of pain ; but, as we note how the capacity for suffering grows with every other capacity, how the noblest natures often have the most of it, we go over to the side of God, and believe that it must be intended as good, and that man must learn to use it for his benefit, as he has learned to use so many others of God's provisions that once troubled him. Even in such monumental cases as those of Paul and his Master, even where men of surpassing nobleness suffer intensely, we have a solemn feeling that is not all pity, certainly not all accusation of the Almighty, but a strange sense of something grand, inevitable, sacred. That is the secret of the fascination of tragedy in its most sublime forms. It is not that we are looking on at a fate which may be ours. There is no element of personal interest. We neither hate nor distrust the world or its Maker. We neither approve nor disapprove, neither praise nor blame. We seem to hear the ancient command to him who looked upon the bush that blazed but was not consumed,—“ Put thy shoes from off thy feet, for the place whereon thou standest is holy ground.” What God is doing in this tragedy or why he is doing it is not the question that is uppermost, but the simple thought that *God is there*, that something is taking place that is sacred both from human understanding and from human judgment. That is the meaning of the cross of Christ to us. It has become the symbol both of the pain that descends upon the noblest souls and of the dignity with which the noblest souls rise to meet it.

We are not left to mere theory in our belief that pain is

meant for good. Let us appeal to experience; and, if our personal experience is not conclusive, let us appeal to the experience of the race. Has suffering, physical or spiritual, been evil or good to mankind?

The moment that we look into the matter we are struck with the great part which pain has played in the progress of life. We look back over the long development of life, and we are shocked by the great amount of suffering through which the animal world has had to pass. We probably exaggerate it, because we estimate it by what we should suffer if we were in the place of the lower animals; and we overlook the general physical comfort and freedom from mental pain in which they spend most of their life. But, whatever the amount of suffering may have been all along this immense past, it has been the motive power of its progress. We often say that the strongest force in the world is the love of happiness; and, if we take happiness in all its forms, from the lowest satisfaction to the highest blessedness, that is doubtless true. But there can be no love of happiness without fear of pain; and few of us ever move on from one form of pleasure to another until we are driven out by discontent, by dread of painful consequences, or by actual suffering. It is not too much to say, therefore, that all life is driven up the stairs, from the lowest brute to the highest saint, by the lash of pain. The struggle for existence is one with the fear of death. The chase after wealth is only another way of putting the dread of poverty. The search for truth is but the reverse side of the shame of ignorance, and the worship of God cannot be disconnected from disgust with self and hatred of sin. If, therefore, the climb has been worth while, if it is a real gain to be a man and not a lichen or a mollusk, the pain which has driven us up has been a good and not an evil. If, anywhere on the staircase, life could have been persuaded that its fear was a delusion, that there was no such thing as pain, and could not be, then, for all we can see, life would have stopped and sat down upon the stair where it was, and would never have reached either the joys or the sorrows of humanity at the top. If human life be a gain over the life of the plant or the brute, then pain, which has been one of the two great forces which have driven it up, is not an evil.

Or, if we care to put the same point in another way, let us ask whether pain has brought weakness or strength into

human life. It would be an exaggerated answer to say that pain is always uplifting and purifying. One of the greatest physicians of the nervous system in the world has said that he has sometimes found great suffering to be actually brutalizing. We have all known cases in which it was discouraging and weakening to the spirits. There are diseases which seem inevitably to bring mental depression, and there are spiritual pains, such as remorse or anxiety or the sense of sin, which to some natures are debilitating and disabling. But these are exceptional cases. Of the vast majority of sufferings from the aches of the body up to the regrets and fears and humiliations of the soul, we can say that, when they are wrestled with or learned from, they are sources of strength and wisdom. Men are men mainly in proportion to what they have overcome. They learn from their mistakes because they have suffered from their mistakes. If they had not suffered, mistake or success would in many cases have been one to them. Persuade a man that his mortification over his failure or his folly is uncalled for and morbid, and you virtually deprive him of the service that it might have done him. Men doubtless set an exaggerated valuation upon the common prizes of life. They expect more happiness from wealth or station, from popularity, or even from knowledge, than these ever can give. But once convince all men that these things are of no value at all, and that the failure to reach them will not be a misfortune, and you change the larger part of human life into a stagnant pool; and all that turbulent but useful flood of human endeavor that now not only turns the wheels of material civilization, but makes courage, industry, patience, sacrifice, will flow back upon itself and breed corruption. When we add the strength of will and heart and soul that is developed in the struggle with pain that is well met, the quiet courage with which men take up the burden of failure which they tried so hard to avoid, the sweetness of spirit with which they bear it, and all the silent power that comes into their souls, as day by day they rise above their mortification and do what still can be done, we have reason to bless that ministry of spiritual suffering that brings so beautiful a life out of its hiding-places in human souls. Health and success are fair to see; but, as we come to understand life and to appreciate true values, we believe that the patient, uncomplaining endurance of physical suffering or

worldly failure, or even of the consciousness of mistake, folly, or sin, is fairer yet to see. The hero is the man who does what is hard, who faces, suffers from, bears, overcomes, what he dreads. He could not be a hero without pain or the possibility of it. Persuade those who admire him that there is no pain, and heroism at once becomes a pitiful pretence; and all the applause which men are so glad to give because it does them good to give it sinks into silence, and the multitude scatter to the insipid commonplaces of life.

We owe to pain, also, most of our sense of human brotherhood. There is such a thing as seeking to share our joys with others, but it plays a small part compared with the nestling of souls together in a common sorrow. "Joy divides," says the proverb, "but sorrow unites." Whatever draws a family so closely together as a bereavement? What man ever had a sore sickness or a heavy calamity that he did not feel himself attracted toward those who passed through the same experience? Human life in general is like the life of the first New England settlers, who lived each on his own farm in times of peace, sufficient unto himself, but, when the Indians came, huddled together in the little fort at the heart of the settlement. The home itself is the result of cold weather. The tropics have no homes. Human society rests upon the need of co-operation against manifold ills that endanger the solitary man. Take pain out of the world, and it falls apart into individualities. Humanity is no longer a brotherhood, nations become mere aggregates, and families only groups of self-interested beings under single roofs. If there be any friendship, compassion, or love on earth, it grows, more than from any other root, out of pain or the fear of pain.

If, then, suffering is the universal companion of life, and if we can see, in spite of notable exceptions, that it brings progress, strength, and sympathy, we cannot call it evil. With all due consideration of the mystery that hangs over it and of our instinctive shrinking from it, we must confess that the good that it does far overbalances the harm that it seems to do. There is, then, no necessary inconsistency between it and the divine goodness; and we may yield to that sense of reality which so forces itself upon us. Pain is not a delusion. It is as real as pleasure, as positive as happiness. The real delusion is our notion that it is evil, out of

God's control, an alien element in the universe. Riper wisdom and keener insight find that God's hand is upon it. It does not escape Him. As the earthly years shall bring experience, or as we shall look back from another world upon what we have enjoyed and suffered in this, we shall say with the apostle, "Now no chastening for the present seemeth to be joyous, but grievous; but afterward it yieldeth the peaceable fruits of righteousness to them that are exercised thereby."

